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ABSTRACT

This general review of language learning theory focuses on criticism of the audiolingual method of instruction which reached its peak in the mid-1960's. Recent trends in teaching methodology, supported by linguistic theories developed by transformational-generative linguists, are examined. Various models of learning are discussed which lead to a listing of practical applications of the emergent linguistic theories for classroom teaching. (RL)

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TOWARD A PRACTICAL THEORY OF SECOND LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

Philip D. Smith, Jr.

Address to Foreign Language Symposium, George Mason College
University of Virginia, November 13, 1971

The Pendulum Swings...

No area of the curriculum seems as beset by new approaches and subsequent reactions as the foreign languages. As the "Audiolingual Decade" of the 1960's closed, enough serious questions had been raised to warrant an examination of the theoretical bases for second language learning in a formal education process.

At precisely the same point in time--1964-65--when the audiolingual approach was gaining widespread acceptance, specialists in language learning were pointing out that basic assumptions of which the audiolingual approach was predicated did not agree with the realities of efficient learning.

Language learning solely as a process of habit formation was early challenged by Chomsky (1959); his theoretical discussion was remote from the classroom until the publication of Wilga Rivers' The Psychologist and the Foreign Language Teacher which pointed out four major assumptions of the audiolingual approach that did not agree with then current (1964) thinking in psychology: That (1) Foreign language learning is a process of habit formation; (2) speech should precede writing; (3) learning should be through analogy rather than analysis; (4) meaning should be taught in a cultural context (i.e. without English)

Carroll, in 1964, stated that "...the audiolingual habit theory was, fifteen years ago, in step with the state of psychological thinking at the time but it is no longer abreast of recent developments."

As late as 1966 Nelson Brooks admitted "...what is called the new approach is largely an act of faith; research to prove the validity of its basic principles is scanty."

It is not the thesis of this talk to either belittle or belabor a movement that did unestimable good in the revitalization of a sagging discipline. Rather, the purpose is to examine the more realistic insights developed over the second half of the past decade to better establish a new perspective.

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STAGES IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Second language learning, no matter through which approach, must involve four basic steps: PRESENTATION of the item, EXPLANATION of the item, REPETITION to mastery, and TRANSFER to

appropriate real-life situations. It is in the ordering, emphasis, and style of these four stages--PERT-- that "methods" differ.

PRESENTATION of the item can be by a variety of media. Presentation assumes perception or true presentation has not occurred. Good materials will provide a variety of presentation media.

EXPLANATION may either preced or follow presentation: "This is the word for "X" or "X" means "Y".

REPETITION, of some sort, is an essential part of language learning. Even the best learner will repeat a new word or structure to himself. Repetition may be of the rote type but is more meaningful in an information exchange context.

TRANSFER allows the learner to move from the learning situation, either structured or informal, to new situations in real-life encounters. Proceding from Repetition to free Transfer should constitute the bulk of foreign language learning. True transfer can never take place within textual materials but only in varying situational encounters with speakers of the target language.

The behavioristic audiolingual approach concentrated on drilling common basic surface patterns of language until they become fully automatic. This CAN be done within a well-defined set of utterances but can never result in the automatic generation of novel utterances. Even the best qualified speaker finds himself searching for appropriate phrases in his own language. Valdman has said, "... the most serious shortcoming of the New Key materials is that they constitute a closed system."

MODELS OF LEARNING

The mental processes involved in learning have been discussed in depth by educational psychologists. The exact relationship of each of the major components--motivation, cognition, evaluation and response formation--is a matter of continuing debate. Carroll (1971) in the June TESOL quaterly has shown that the Skinnerian Stimulus-Response psychology has been viewed too narrowly. He points out the S-R paradigm should be S-Organism-R, more closely approaching the recent "Cognitive" learning paradigm.

COGNITIVE APPROACH

Cognitive use of language is undeniable. It seems prudent to teach the learner to capitalize on this process at an early stage. A basic educational psychology text states that,

"Creative behavior is always original behavior" (McDonald, 1965). The reverse must also be true, "Original behavior is creative behavior."

Since original behavior is crucial in actual communications situations, the instructional program must provide the learner with early opportunities to create new utterances. Early encouragement will lessen the trauma certain to come when faced with a novel situation in a different culture.

Recently we read about a "Cognitive-Code" theory of second language learning. This approach is still widely defined.

One specialist uses "Cognitive" for materials which contain linguistic metalanguage--grammatical explanations. Another may use "cognitive" to refer to an instructional approach in which the learner is forced into conscious involvement in language manipulation.

The most recent--and most detailed--explication of a "Cognitive" approach is by Chastain in his THEORY TO PRACTICE. The most "learner involving" is the Russian course taught by Alexander Lipson at Harvard.

Donaldson in his excellent paper at the Sixth Southern Conference, points out that the cognitive-code theory presents a broad base. Within the theoretical context of conscious learner involvement there may indeed be a number of quite different instructional programs.

Let us now pause to consider, at a "practical" level, the

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGES.

The role of the native language in second language learning is still one of considerable debate. Four points seem clear, however.

1. Language is acquired through the senses.

2. Language learning is not confined to one particular spot in the brain.

3. "Compound bilingualism is not a practical goal for educators; and

4. The "Cognitive" process can usually be aided by using the native language.

The behaviorist approach attempted to create in the learner a separate mental "language center" in addition to the one used in native language performance. It is believed by some (Brooks, 1961) that the truly bilingual person has developed

two essentially separate language centers.

That truly independent nueral language centers do not in reality exist is readily apparent. If true, the bilingual would be incapable of mental translation. A more viable graphic representation of bilingualism is that of Jakobovits with a linear gradation of competence from one language to another.

In terms of the realities of second language instruction in the school setting, compound bilingualism is not a practical goal (Sparkman, 1949; Hale and Budar, 1970). It seems presumptuous to cling to the claim that in thirty to forty minutes per day--at ages past or during adolescence--that a teacher can really encourage the formation of new brain centers.

It also seems foolish to pretend that the intelligent learner is not utilizing his inherent native language mechanism to receive, perceive and categorize new language. Granted, once an adequate knowledge of the second language exists, new items can be acquired without conscious relationship to the mother tongue. However, in the thinking human, even children, the intuitive need is to know. All learning can only be meaningful in terms of what is already known.

Gamlin (1968) summarizes his excellent discussion of these relationships with the statements, "...second language learning is a process which, in many ways is differnnt from first language acquisition;" and " The claim that it would be possible to repeat the first language acquisition in second language instruction is an illusion."

The most widely accepted theoretical model of language today is that of transformational grammar as advanced by Chomsky in Aspects of the Theory of Syntax (1964) and presented in a simplified form by Fraser (1970). Here the (1) lexicon and (2) semantic rules interact with the (3) base component of Phrase-Structure rules to produce the "Deep Structure" representation of language. Portions of the deep structure representation are manipulated by the (4) transformational rules resulting in a surface structure representation. The (5) morphophonemic rules of the language convert the abstract Surface Structure into the phonetic form of the (6) utterance. Despite some debate, this model of language presents a realistic model for pedagogical purposes. Language learning theorists should turn from emphasis on Surface Structure manipulation toward the Deep Structure level. This is essentially what Rivers called for in a recent presentation to the DLIon Listening Comprehension--the learner should be trained to repeat the gist of a complicated structure.

A "Deep Structure Approach" seems to have great implications for classroom instruction.

This may very well be the formalization of what the language learner intuitively does to obtain the information

about his own language--to move from an unclear phonological surface phenomenon to the underlying Deep Structure representation. The structural role of each portion of an utterance that he has never encountered before can become clear to the learner with a proper choice of simple questions.

Seuren states; "The base is the only 'creative' part of the grammar, the transformational subcomponent and the semantic and phonological components are solely interpretative." (p.4)

Since the transformational component is purely stylistic, it follows that the resultant "Surface Structure" utterance can be systematically "de-transformed" by an un-comprehending listener until he reaches a point approximately at his own linguistc sophistication--reducing complicated utterances into more simple units until he reaches his own linguistic level of competence. Simple questioning can break down a long utterance into more easily comprehensible parts.

Chomsky has based the examination of grammar on such ambiguous sentences as "Old men and women admitted free." Both Chomsky and the hypothetical old man know that ambiguity seldom exists long in context. Chomsky is concerned with the adequacy of a theoretical grammar, the old man with the price of a ticket. Not so the speaker of a language. He is more interested in removing ambiguity by establishing context. In a real-life situation, the native speaker who encounters a linguistic ambiguity or an "unknown" item intuitively questions until he can accomodate the unknown utterance.

"Wait a minute. What's an ick?"
"Smith? Was that Sam Smith or Rod Smith who was arrested?"
"Psst! What's he talking about?"

The most successful second language learner is the one who has developed this sense of <u>active inquiry</u>, engaging in what Spolsky, Rivers, and Steinkraus identify as "active listening." This learner consciously examines the target utterance for familiar words to "get the sense" and does not hesitate to formulate sentences even if they may be wrong. <u>He is not afraid to try.</u>

Active inquiry is the one device that is used throughout the human life-time even if other language acquisition facilities change biologically or psychologically:

"Mommy, what's a...?"
"Honey, you use such big words."
"Do you want a 'Whippersnapper Fizz' or a 'Gin Slingshot',kid?"
"Nurse, what does 'benign' mean?"

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR CLASSROOM TEACHING

A number of principles and techniques growing from structural linguistics and behaviorist psychology were formalized into what became known as the "audiolingual" approach. These ideas were widely accepted (Brooks, 1960; Lado, 1964), but are no longer considered valid. Current thinking among many foreign language educators now seems to indicate that:

1. A conscious knowledge of structure does help the language learner to acquire a faster and more secure command of the second language.

2. Vocabulary is of more immediate communicative importance than structure. Basic survival, personal welfare and even some work needs can often be overcome with content words and pantomime. Learners sense this implicitly and would rather communicate haltingly and "know the words" than to acquire a greater fluency with fewer items. Formerly the pre-eminence of structure-rules-by-analogy led to concentration of few vocabulary items in tightly controlled pattern drills. This closed system would not tolerate learner creativity.

3. There are many concepts and linguistic features common to both languages. Often statements have been made that there are no word-for-word equivalents from language to language. This simply is not true, especially in languages which share common cultural features. "Sleep" is probably universally translatable, "table" can be translated directly into several dozen languages. "Chopsticks" is a shared concept eminently translatable from Chinese to Korean to Japanese, and fork from French to English. True, there are minor variations in type, grip, and use but both are easily identified across cultural boundaries. Commonication, even with error, is more important both to the learner intrinsically and to his associates. The person who can "say the most", albeit imperfectly, is the envy of a person with better pronunciation but nothing to say.

4. This realization leads to another, that rote memorization of dialogues us unfruitful.

5. Indeed, the concept of mastery before progression is not valid. The English-speaking child certainly is not kept from saying throw until he has overcome his inability to say three in "one, two, free."

Concentration on items until mastery clearly is not necessary either for basic or creative communication.

What a person has to say is often more important than the forgiveable errors he makes to communicate.

6. A corollary to the realization that a consious knowledge of the task makes learning more efficient and that there are indeed one-to-one correspondences in vocabulary and strucutre, is that a complete ban on the use of the native language is not efficient.

Much language can be taught without reference to the native language, both vocabulary and structure, expecially with the use of visuals. Ten seconds of the native language, however, can avoid days or weeks of misperceptions. As Finocclario recently told language teachers (1970), "We delude ourselves if we think that the student is not translating items into his native tongue." Any foreign language supervisor, alert to student reactions and privy to the whispered "What's xxx mean?" must agree.

7. Lastly, experience, reasoned judgment, and some excellent research that the rigid adherence to an extended audiolingual pre-reading period is not necessary. Interference between oral and written skills often occurs but the problems are the same, early or late. On the other hand, Prater--commenting on the work of Chomsky and Hall in Sound Patterns of English--points out that the patterning of a written language (English) may indeed contribute to the acquisition of phonological rules.

Rapid self-directed vocabulary acquisition on the part of the learner will only come with second language literacy. After all, this is how we expand our own repetoire. New Peace Corps materials, for example, now stress early literacy and formal command of structure. John Harvey's new Korean course has 3-hour programs in Hangul which permits learners to read Korean in a very short time.

Put all of these language teaching ingredients in a cupboard, turn loose a group of knowledgeable cooks and what kind of recipe do you come up with? I was given this opportunity two years ago by the Center for Curriculum Development on behalf of Peace Corps. Not the old "working overtime in the attic" approach, but carte blanche to gather a team of experienced people and restructure entire language programs in French (for Africa), Portuguese, and Korean. Our final results--arrived at independently--closely resembles the "Cognitive" format described by Kenneth Chastain in his new book, The Development of Modern Language Skills: THEORY INTO PRACTICE.

The CCD "Deep Structure" materials take this format:

1. A pre-study focus, telling the learner exactly what he will learn and what to conciously look for in the new material;

2. New language in narration or dialogue form, initially

presented via tape and filmstrip with immediate availability of the written form, even in Korean;

3. Structural explanations and paradigms with written excercises;

4. Reading selections--with new vocabulary glossed in the language--accompanied by appropriate questions;

5. Cultural notes;

6. Suggested role playing and out-of-class activities.

Learners come to class knowing what to look for and with some familiarity with key phrases. They first get a brief overview of the entire unit, then Explanation and Repetition are combined by using question-answer techniques which avoid rote memorization and repetition. Lastly, students personalize, then transfer, the material to other situations. Sturcture is reinforced and vocabulary expanded through the readings.

Does it work? Permit me to read from a recent letter from the Training Officer, Peace Corps, Brazil:

> "...the Spring 1971 program...averaged an FSI [speaking rating] 2.3 after 12 weeks and 235 hours of instruction. Previously this figure had only been attained with 280 to 340 hours of instruction.
>
> The summer programs appear to be doing as well or better..."

There have been some problems with teaching these materials but the kind that we only dared to dream about. Teachers have been given so much flexibility that their creative powers have been severly taxed. Once freed from group chanting--and faced with a collection of individuals who can already speak new sentences--teachers have to actually think of meaningful things to talk about. The class becomes "individual" centered; the new language must be used in direct interchange. Some teachers have not been able to readily cope with students who can actually express themselves.

Despite results that show a 1/3 economy in instructional time, no claims are made that this is a new "miracle" approach. Rather it is a "practical" approach, the result of some hard-headed rethinking helped along by fresh insights. It works.

Thank you.